Unblemished: The Parable of the Polished Mind

A Visual Distillation of the Anaṅgaṇasutta on Self-Awareness and Purity

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A person's inner state is defined by two factors.

1. Their purity

(whether a 'blemish' is present).

2. Their awareness of it

(whether they 'truly understand' their state).

These two factors give rise to four fundamental possibilities.

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The Four Individuals and the Four Cups

Worse

The Blemished & Unaware

One individual with a blemish doesn't truly understand: 'There is a blemish in me.'

Like a dirty bronze cup the owners keep in a dirty place. Over time, it gets even dirtier and more stained.

Better

The Blemished & Aware

Another individual with a blemish does truly understand: 'There is a blemish in me.'

Like a dirty bronze cup the owners use and have cleaned. Over time, it gets cleaner and brighter.

Worse

The Unblemished & Unaware

One individual without a blemish doesn't truly understand: 'There is no blemish in me.'

Like a clean bronze cup the owners keep in a dirty place. Over time, it gets dirtier and more stained.

Better

The Unblemished & Aware

Another individual without a blemish does truly understand: 'There is no blemish in me.'

Like a clean bronze cup the owners use and have cleaned. Over time, it gets cleaner and brighter.

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A blemish is not a single flaw, but a sphere of bad, unskillful wishes.

> ‘Blemish’ is a term for the spheres of bad, unskillful wishes.

When these ego-driven wishes are not met, the result is anger and bitterness. The text specifies: “And that anger and that bitterness are both blemishes.”

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Unskillful Wishes, Part I: The Desire for Concealment and Deference

These wishes arise from a desire to control how one is perceived and judged by others.

Regarding an Offense

"If I commit an offense, I hope the mendicants don't find out!"

Regarding Accusation

"I hope the mendicants accuse me in private, not in the middle of the Saṅgha." and "I hope I'm accused by a peer, not by someone who is not a peer."

Regarding the Teacher

"Oh, I hope the Teacher will teach the mendicants by repeatedly questioning me alone, not some other mendicant."

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Unskillful Wishes, Part II: The Desire for Superiority and Status

These wishes stem from the ego's need to be seen as special, important, and preeminent.

For Position

"Oh, I hope the mendicants will enter the village for the meal putting me at the very front..."

For Possessions

"Oh, I hope that I alone get the best seat, the best drink, and the best almsfood..."

For Recognition

"I hope that I alone give the verses of appreciation..." and "Oh, I hope that I might teach the Dhamma to the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen..."

For Reverence

"Oh, I hope that the monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen will honor, respect, revere, and venerate me alone..."

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Our inner state is not private. It shines through our actions and determines how we are perceived.

The text contrasts two individuals based on whether these “unskillful wishes are seen and heard to be given up.” This determines whether their spiritual companions will “honor, respect, revere, and venerate them.”

A new simile illustrates this principle: the covered bronze cup in the marketplace.

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The Test of True Value: What Lies Within the Cup?

The Blemished Mendicant

Even though they dwell in **the wilderness**... their spiritual companions don't honor... them.

Like a clean bronze cup prepared with the **carcass of a snake, a dog, or a human**.

As soon as people see inside, they are filled with loathing, revulsion, and disgust. Not even those who were hungry wanted to eat it.

The Unblemished Mendicant

Even though they dwell **within a village**... their spiritual companions **honor**... them.

Like a clean bronze cup prepared with **boiled fine rice... served with many soups and sauces**.

As soon as people see inside, they are filled with liking, attraction, and relish. Even those who had eaten wanted to eat it.

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The teaching itself is a tool for purification.

Venerable Mahāmoggallāna offers a simile inspired by Sāriputta’s words.

The Wainwright’s Wheel

> ‘Oh, I hope Samīti the wainwright planes out the crooks, bends, and flaws in this rim. Then the rim will be rid of crooks, bends, and flaws, pure, and consolidated in the core.’

The Connection

Moggallāna notes that Sāriputta's teaching 'planes their faults... as if he knows my heart with his heart!’

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The same teaching is received in two different ways.

The Unreceptive Follower

Those faithless individuals who went forth... to earn a livelihood. They're devious, deceitful ... restless, deceitful... restless, insolent... unmindful, lacking situational awareness... with straying minds.

Reaction

For them, this teaching exposes and planes away their faults, a potentially uncomfortable process.

The Receptive Follower

Those gentlemen who went forth... out of faith. They're They're not devious... They awad... They guard their sense doors... They're mindful, with situational awareness, immersion, and unified minds.

Reaction

Hearing this exposition... they drink it up and devour it, as it were.

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For the faithful, this wisdom is not a burden, but a crown.

The Simile of the Garland:
“Suppose there was a woman or man who was young, youthful, and fond of adornments, and had bathed their head. Presented with a garland of lotuses, jasmine, or liana flowers, they would take them in both hands and place them on the crown of the head.”

In the same way, the receptive followers joyfully accept this teaching.

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Key Insights from the Parable

Awareness is the Key.

The difference between ‘better’ and ‘worse' is not the presence of a blemish, but whether you “truly understand” it.

Blemishes are Ego-Wishes.

They are the anger and bitterness that arise from unmet desires for status, control, and special treatment.

Purification is an Active Process.

Like a wainwright planing a wheel, we must actively and skillfully work to smooth away our inner flaws.

Inner Purity Shines Outwardly.

A mind free from unskillful wishes is a source of delight and inspiration to others, like a bowl of fine food.

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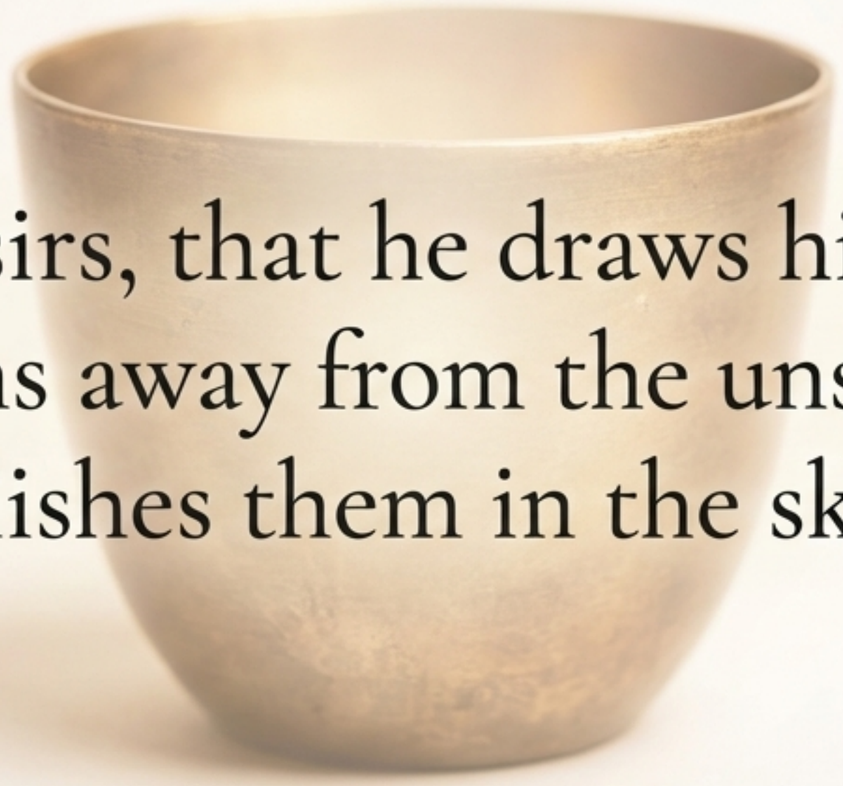

It’s good, sirs, that he draws his spiritual companions away from the unskillful and establishes them in the skillful.

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